THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) The number of passports issued from the two Passport Offices in Andhra Pradesh in 2003-04 are 3,20,783 and in 2004-05 (till January 2005) are 2,96,668;

(b) Steps taken by the Government to issue passports with more ease include - (i) computerization of Passport Offices; (ii) decentralisation of submission of passport applications to district level; (iii) machine-writing of passports; (iv) wider availability of passport application forms; (v) regular upgradation of office equipment; (vi) use of IVRS (Interactive Voice Response System) in Passport Office Hyderabad which provides information regarding passport procedures round the clock in multilingual mode; and (vii) streamlining the existing system in the Passport Office, Hyderabad through Quality Management System (ISO-9000).

(c) and (d) There is no proposal to open a new Passport Office in the State at present.

Candlelight vigil by war widows association

361. SHRI VIJAY J. DARDA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Government are aware of the War Widows Association's Candlelight Vigil at India Gate on 31st of January, impressing upon the Government for the release of officers and soldiers from India and Pakistan, missing in action from 1965 and 1971 wars;

(b) if so, whether Government has full information about the details of such Indian and Pakistani soldiers in each other's country who are languishing in jails of otherwise incarcerated; and

(c) whether there is any on-going detente conducive towards working out such a 'release' through effective diplomatic dialogue?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) 54 missing Indian Defence Personnel are reported to be in the Pakistani custody. Governemnt of Pakistan has, howevere, never acknowledged the presence of any Indian POW in Pak jails. There is no Pakistani Prisoner of War in Indian custody.

(c) Government, through diplomatic channels, have been consistently taking up the issue of early release of Indian POWs believed to be in Pakistan custody since 1971-72. However, Pakistan Government has been consistently denyign existence of any Indian POWs in Pakistan. The matter was, *interalia*, also taken up during the meeting between Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and the Prime Minister of Pakistan on November 24, 2004 and also during the Foreign Secretary level talks on December 27-28, 2004.

Quality service to passport applicants

362. SHRI K.B. KRISHNAMURTHY: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the number of people, on an average, that visit the Passport Office, Bangalore every day to make enquiries and to get passport related work done;

(b) whether Government are aware that the applicants have to wait for three to four hours in the queue even to make an enquiry or to check the status of passport; and

(c) the steps proposed to be taken to provide better and quality service to the applicants at Bangalore Passport Office?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNALAFFAIRS: (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Passport Office Bangalore is visted on an average by 500 people every day for passport related work;

(b) During rush hours, it could take some time for an applicant to get their work done. However, all efforts are made to minimise the waiting time for an applicant;

(c) The Government has taken several steps to provide better quality service to the applicants of Passports Office Bangalore. These include (i) introduction of machine writing of passports; (ii) computerization of passport office; (iii) decentralization of submission of passport applications to district level throught District Passsport Cells; (iv) wider and easy availability of passport application forms; (v) regular upgradation of office equipment; (vi) web-based status check of passport applications; and (vii) touch screen kiosk to get passport related information and status check of passport applications.